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The production of subjectivity in neoliberal culture industries: the case of coworking spaces

Abstract

This article adds to contemporary studies of neoliberalism by offering an empirical investigation of the production of subjectivity in the context of coworking spaces' sociality. Coworking spaces are exemplary milieux where to explore the organisation and significance of work. Drawing on the life history of a creative worker and member of a leading coworking space, I unveil the ethical labour that is required to access coworking's sociality. Using a Foucauldian framework, I conceptualise this process as a process of subjectivation and concentrate on its ambivalent character, signalling the inherent intertwinement of self-commodification and self-improvement. This article contributes to the scholarly debates on the organisation and significance of work in two key ways. Firstly, it expands our understanding of how the production of subjectivity is experienced at the level of the self. Secondly, it argues that coworking spaces function as apparatuses for the production of subjectivities in neoliberal culture industries.

Introduction

This article adds to the studies of the production of subjectivity, sociality, and economic value that characterises neoliberal culture industries. It does that by analysing the life history of a member of Impact Hub, a successful and widespread franchise of coworking spaces. This perspective allows to shed light on the 'psychic life' of neoliberalism (Scharff, 2016), i.e. on the ways in which neoliberalism is lived out. What I am concerned with, more precisely, is the ethical labour (Coleman, 2005) that workers undertake in order to take advantage of the network sociality of coworking spaces (De Peuter et. al. 2017; Bandinelli et. al., 2019). This distinctive focus on the selfhood permits to unveil the subjective changes that individuals experience and effect on themselves so as to be 'fit to work' in neoliberal culture industries.

Many scholars in the field of cultural studies and critical theory have identified the production of subjectivity at the core of neoliberal processes of valorisation (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Lazzarato,

2009; Rose, 1990; Ross, 2004, 2008; Wittel 2001), but little has been said about the ways in which this is experienced and made sense of at the level of the self (Scharff, 2016). This article seeks to address this gap by drawing on the life history of Sergio, an aspirant freelance photographer who by participating to the sociality of Impact Hub developed a "new" subjectivity that he recognises as indispensable to make a career in the culture industries. By exploring the account of an individual who undertook a process of subjectivation within the context of coworking spaces, this article advances the discussion on entrepreneurial subjectivities in two main ways. First, it tackles the question of subjectivity highlighting the ethical labour that individuals perform on themselves negotiating with and embodying cultural codes, norms, and discourses. Second, it sheds light on the function of coworking spaces in contemporary cultural economies.

Coworking spaces have been identified as an increasingly influential kind of creative hubs (Dovey and Pratt, 2016) that provide entrepreneurial workers with new opportunities for socialisation (Gandini, 2015; Moriset, 2014; Spinuzzi, 2010). A few critical studies have explored the ambivalent sociality of coworking spaces, which combines entrepreneurial individualism with instances of collaboration (De Peuter et. al. 2017; Bandinelli and Gandini, 2019) as well as the discursive, social and material devices with which such sociality is generated (Ivaldi et. al, 2019; Merkel, 2015). Researchers have interrogated coworking as embodying new modes of subjectivation (Vidaillet and Bousalham, 2018), analysing, for instance, the 'discursive subjectivity' of managers and how it produces coworking's social practices (Ivaldi et. al. 2019). Yet, to the best of my knowledge, no research to date has been concentrated specifically on the reflexive production of subjectivity that individuals experience in coworking spaces. Of itself, the article aims to fill this gap. In so doing, it contributes to the debates of work in neoliberal societies, by furthering our understanding of how the production of subjectivity is lived out in the context of the rising phenomenon of coworking spaces.

The article is organised as follows: to begin with, I review the literature on work in neoliberal societies. Then, I provide an overview of the scope and significance of coworking spaces. Following from that, I offer an explanation of the rationale and purposes of my methodological choices. Subsequently, I recount the story of an individual, Sergio, in the years in which he became a member of Impact Hub. Through the analysis of interviews' excerpts, I show how the discourses and practices of Impact Hub had a transformative effect on him. Finally, I reflect on two key elements. The first is the intrinsic ambiguity of such process of subjectivation, which on the one hand responds to the commodifying logic of self-branding, while on the other is also perceived as

a pattern towards self-improvement and emancipation. The second relates to the role of coworking spaces in neoliberal societies: their success and impressive rise may be due to the fact that they function as incubators of subjects, for they articulate a rational systematisation of the entanglement of the social, subjective, and economic dimensions that characterises neoliberal culture industries.

Subjectivity at work, subjectivity as work

In the last three decades, a significant number of studies have explored the implications and effects of the entrepreneurialisation of the self and of work in neoliberal societies (e.g. DuGay, 1996; Sennett, 1998; Ross, 2004; McRobbie, 2001, 2002; Thrift, 1998, 2005; Adkins and Lury, 1999; Gill and Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2015). Previously perceived as a site of alienation, work in neoliberal time has become a way to express one's inner talents and passions. It has become pleasant (Donzelot, 1991) and passionate (Arvidsson et. al. 2010); a labour of hope (Wright, 2018) and love. This intertwinement between the existential and economic dimension gets articulated in the figure of the entrepreneur of the self: the neoliberal subject *par excellence*. The entrepreneur of the self is the one who conceives of themselves as a form of capital to be invested, and of their income as the return on such investment (Foucault, 2005). In this sense, to be an entrepreneur does not refer to the possession and use of economic capital in an innovative and financially risky endeavour. Rather, it indicates at a way of relating to one's life-project: being an entrepreneur is first and foremost an ethical matter, a matter of making of one self a certain kind of person in order to acquire a certain kind of status (Foucault, 2000).

The entrepreneur of the self is a subject that responds to the de-institutionalisation of the job market and the consequent production of competition by interpreting themselves as a form of business (McNay, 2009); whence the importance of cultivating a specific subjectivity. The process of self-fashioning, far from being a "spontaneous" act of self-expression, resembles a set of skills that must be learnt and deployed. As Lazzarato put it 'to be employable one must conduct oneself and have a lifestyle which is in harmony with the market' (Lazzarato, 2009: 127). In this context, 'being oneself' may become an injunction. The failure to do that is likely to result in a more or less temporary exclusion from the scene (Adkins and Lury, 1999; Marwick, 2014; McRobbie, 2002).

While individuals turn into their own micro-structure (McRobbie, 2002), the network of their relationships forms the structure at a macro level. Establishing social relationships emerges as a compulsory and instrumental activity, with the consequent and much debated blurring of work and life, labour and play (Hermes, 2015). Relationships become the main material and task of work:

a form of capital without which the subject-entrepreneur cannot survive the market, to the point that work itself becomes 'the ability to activate and manage productive cooperation' (Lazzarato 1996: 5). Wittel (2001) was one of the first to empirically investigate sociality at work in neoliberal urban economies, pointing at its commodifying, informational and ephemeral nature.

The diffusion of digital technologies has made these dynamics ever more visible. Social media have provided new tools for establishing work-related connections, thus producing and reproducing a culture where the signifier 'friendship' is used to refer (also) to quantifiable and instrumental relationships. The investment of the self that is required to keep up with the demands of such networked hypersociality is considerable: what is at stake are not only contingent strategic interactions, but a kind of cognitive and affective exchange that involves a form of mediated intimacy (Duffy, 2015; Gregg, 2011).

This implies a degree of self-disclosure oriented towards the communication of a supposedly 'authentic' self, whose features are subjected to a series of non-written norms regulating what and how a person should be (or appear to be) in order to access a certain social and cultural scene (Marwick, 2014). This is evident in the discourses and practices of self-branding, where the brand acts as a device for managing and communicating one's identity and value in the labour market (Arvidsson et. al. 2016; Hearn, 2008). While self-branding practices inevitably entail a degree of commodification, they are also characterised by a reflexive production of the self, for they are performed by the self on itself (Horschild, 2012). Self-branding can thus be understood as a form of hermeneutic of the public self (Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2013). This does not mean that individuals brand themselves in a free creative act, for there are ready made technologies that determine the way in which the self can be branded (Arvidsson et. al. 2016).

Self branding and network sociality are the two sides of the entrepreneurial work's coin. The accumulation of social capital in the context of network sociality (Wittel, 2001) is dependent on the production, communication and management of the self. Conversely, the individual self emerges as a 'networked', i.e. defined primarily by its social connections (Papacharissi, 2011). The interdependency between a hermeneutic of the self, the cultivation of social relationships, and the production of economic value is what distinguishes entrepreneurialised work in neoliberal societies.

Differently from the majority of the studies on this topic (with notable exceptions including Marwick, 2014 and Scharff, 2016) this article explores such intertwining from the ground-up. It does that through the story of one individual who has undertaken a process of subjectivation by participating to the sociality of a coworking space in the aim of building a career in the culture industries. Before proceeding to the empirical sections of the article, I provide a brief account of the relevance of coworking spaces and of their significance for the study of entrepreneurial work in neoliberal societies.

The rise of coworking spaces

Born in 2005 as a grassroots movement advocating a collaborative approach to work, coworking is now a widespread phenomenon. According to Deskmag, an on-line outlet done by and for coworkers, by the end of 2018 1.7 million people will be working in around 19,000 coworking spaces around the world (Deskmag, 2018). The growth of the coworking scene, alongside its claim of reforming the ways in which freelancers build and experience their career, make of coworking spaces one the most significant environments where to observe emerging forms of entrepreneurial work in the creative and culture industries. Coworking is a manifold phenomenon. Different typologies of shared work spaces may fall under the umbrella term 'coworking space': from corporate-driven start-up incubators, to spaces dedicated to manual labour and digital craft (i.e. fab-labs and makerspaces), and shared offices for freelances. Moreover, coworking spaces play a different economic and cultural role depending on the environments in which they operate.¹

Notwithstanding these differences, the common purpose at the hearth of the "coworking movement" is that of re-territorialising the professional lives of individualised workers, enabling embodied socialisation with potential collaborators, clients, colleagues. Caught between the necessity to work from home and the need to building connections in order to work, torn between the injunction to be competitive and that of establishing relationships of trust and affection, freelancers have been portrayed as isolated and detached, sometimes depressed, often broke (e.g. Gurstein, 2001; Kjaerulff, 2010; Kylin and Karlsson, 2008). To them, coworking spaces propose a twofold solution: a (relatively) cheap work station and plug-and-play collegiality; offering what has been called a "third way" of working, halfway between a "standard" working life within a traditional workplace, and a life as an independent worker (Gandini, 2015).

¹ Although they emerged and have expanded mostly in creative cities (Moriset, 2014), a few studies are reporting on rural or peripheral realities (Fuji, 2015; Gandini and Cossu, forthcoming).

Importantly, the reterritorialisation effected by coworking spaces does not concern only the provision of a physical space, but also the production of a powerful identitarian narrative. Its conceptual core, which is produced and reproduced by virtually every actor in the scene (from the more independent to the most corporate), revolves around the promotion of a different approach to work. This is characterised by the combination of entrepreneurialism with the values of collaboration (Bandinelli and Gandini, 2019). It is precisely this combination to constitute the core of coworking's symbolic proposal, its promise being to offer entrepreneurialised workers the possibility to belong to a "community" (Spinuzzi et. al. 2019) while pursuing their personal interest. The "community" of coworking is thus distinguished by a prominent aspirational character: it appeals to individuals' desire to be part of a material and symbolic space where they can perform a strategic network sociality while participating to a shared ethical horizon (DePeuter et. al. 2017).

What emerges is a highly ambivalent social formation, marked by the complex entanglement of two orders of values. On the one hand coworking replicates the instrumental logic of the entrepreneur of the self, offering a 'setting for network sociality' (De Peuters et. al. 2017: 11) where collaboration is not disinterested but rather emerges as a means to an end (Spinuzzi, 2012; Colleoni and Arvidsson, 2015; Gandini, 2015; Blein, 2016). Yet, on the other hand there is the attempt to produce the conditions for solidarity (Merkel, 2015; Brown, 2017), whose space of existence may not be entirely foreclosed (De Peuter et. al. 2017).

Recently, a number of studies have furthered the reflection on the sociality of coworking spaces, analysing the tension between its grassroots origins and the replication of neoliberal values (De Peuter et. al. 2017) and discussing the differences between independent and corporate spaces (Gandini and Cossu, forthcoming). Scholars have warned against a simplistic understanding of coworking's sociality, pointing at its plurality (Ivaldi et. al. 2019; Ivaldi and Scaratti, 2019). In fact, the very definition of coworking may vary depending on the actor and their position in the scene (Spinuzzi, 2012). Certainly, practices of sharing and collaborations can entail a variety of interactions: from transactional relationships to social support, from active business partnerships to sheer physical co-presence (Gerdenitsch et. al. 2016; Ivaldi and Scaratti, 2019; Spinuzzi, 2012; Spinuzzi et. al. 2019).

However, there is still little effort to understand what is required on the part of the individual to get access to the sociality of coworking spaces, and what this sociality does to them. I aim to fill this gap by focusing on the ethical labour (Coleman, 2005) that a person has to do in order to take advantage of being a member of a coworking space. In this respect, I take coworking spaces as a

case study for the production of subjectivity, and claim that they represent a systematisation of such process. I argue that coworking spaces can be interpreted as apparatuses for the production of a subjectivity that responds to the requirements of the neoliberal culture industries.

Methodological note

The data analysed here derives from a larger research project on the subjectivity of social entrepreneurs (Bandinelli, forthcoming). To the purpose of studying the reflexive narratives of social entrepreneurs, I did 18 months (from November 2011 to June 2012) mobile and multi-sited ethnography that had Impact Hub Westminster (now closed) and Impact Hub Milan as its bases. The research methods that I used include: participant observation, action research, qualitative interviewing, and events ethnography (Bandinelli, 2017).

The vast majority of research participants, most of them members of Impact Hub, are white well educated, middle class young adults living in urban contexts: an international crowd of nomadic workers living a financially precarious life (Czarniawska, 2013; Büscher, 2014). While I have not focused on gender, my observations suggest that coworking spaces are not marked by an evident pattern of gender discrimination. However, the majority has been designed by white men (Fessler, 2018). As a response to that, a number of women-only coworking spaces are being funded in the UK, Europe, the US and Asia (Lam, 2017). Certainly, more research on gender and race in coworking spaces is needed.

During the fieldwork, I met Sergio, with whom I had multiple informal conversations and 5 long open-ended interviews, over a period of five years from 2013 to 2018. In what follows, I dwell on the life history of Sergio to offer the narrative account of a process of subjectivation . Each excerpt is assigned a year, to offer the reader a sense of the development of Sergio's subjectivity over time ².

The focus on individual stories is a fairly established practice in anthropology (e.g. Biehl 2005; Crapanzano 1980; Desjarlais 2003; Gubrium and Holstein, 2008), which has been applied also to

² It should be noted that the process of subjectivation of Sergio does not take place against a stable institutional backdrop, but rather in a rapidly transforming environment. As discussed above, the coworking industry has evolved substantially over the course of the last years. However, Sergio's narrative stresses his own changes in response to Impact Hub's invitations and injunctions. Hence, since my focus is Sergio's experience and perspective, in this occasion I will not take Impact Hub structural or contingent modifications into explicit account.

the study of work in the culture industries (e.g. Mensitieri, 2018; Czarniawska, 2013). This methodological choice does not entail a personalistic view of knowledge, but rather the choosing of a particular perspective through which to gather knowledge, to access part of the world through the words of one person (Gobrium and Holstein, 2008). At times, Sergio's narrative will be echoed, complemented or challenged by excerpts from other participants' interviews. Thus, we see how other individuals may describe a similar reality in their own words, unveiling different aspects or further highlighting the same ones. In this way, we can get a glimpse of the relational and intersubjective character of narratives (Clandinin, 2013).

I concentrate on one individual in order to analyse a process of subjectivation, thus an ethical process, in the Foucauldian sense of ethics as the dimension concerning 'the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rappor a soi*' (Foucault, 2000: 263), therefore a form of continual work on the self, a perennial activity of 'self bricolage' (Rabinow, 2000: xxxix). Such project of self-fashioning unfolds between the two extremes of freedom and domination. Individuals exercise their freedom by effecting operations so as to transform themselves, but these practices 'are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself [sic]. They are models that he finds in his [sic] culture and that are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society his social group' (Foucault, 2000: 291). Therefore, the kind of freedom exercised by the subject in crafting the self, is never of an absolute kind, it rather is defined by a web of power relationships and regimes of truth.

Following Sergio's process of subjectivation, we observe the tension between what is sometimes called 'subjectivation' and 'subjectification'. The first term stresses the agency of the subject, while the second underlines the subjection to social, cultural, political, economic injunctions. However, this distinction can only be done at an abstract level, for in the phenomenology of processes of subjectivation the two dimensions are in an inseparable dialectic relation. For this reason, when I use the term 'subjectivation' I already imply the negotiation between technologies of the self and technologies of power.

I believe that such a perspective may be particularly useful to studying the individualised field of work in the creative and culture industries, for it permits to highlight the path of self-enhancement without romanticising individual choices (Büscher, 2014) but rather underlying the tension between the demands and invitations that a given context pose on the individual, and how the individual negotiates with them in the precarious equilibrium between re-appropriation and cooptation.

A hubber in the making

Impact Hub

Funded in 2005 in the London borough of Islington, Impact Hub is a social franchise, comprising of over 100 coworking spaces in 50 countries. At the time of writing, 'hubbers', as Impact Hub members are called, amount to over 16000 members. Impact Hub is addressed to social entrepreneurs, variously defined also as 'impact makers' and 'social innovators'. The definition of social entrepreneurs is pretty wide in this case, as it applies to anyone who subscribes to an ethos combining entrepreneurship with the will to have a 'positive impact' in society (Bandinelli, forthcoming). In this respect, Impact Hub replicates the specific symbolic assemblage of the coworking movement, thus it can function as a representative case study.

Impact Hub is a global network, yet each branch partially reflects the specificities of the local context and may have a slightly different orientation. However, what distinguishes Impact Hub from more grassroots and independent coworking spaces is its franchised communication strategy (Cossu, 2018) and its standardised social protocols, which are applied and deployed regardless of the location. This contribute to create a homogeneous and replicable cultural atmosphere.

Impact Hub members are mostly freelancers coming from different backgrounds. For example, according to Impact Hub Milan Community Mapping (Larsen et. al. 2012), 50% of its members have a background in communication, 15% in architecture and design, and 29% come from the creative industries. The majority of Milanese hubbers, i.e. 76%, declared to be working on projects in communication, followed by 52% who claimed to operate in the creative industries. During my fieldwork at Impact Hub Westminster, I observed a similar situation: members worked in a variety of fields such as technology and innovation, media and communication, art, design and architecture.

As every coworking, Impact Hub articulates its narrative through the signifier "community", which in itself carries the promise of a different, more pleasant and efficient way of working (Impact Hub, 2018). Pleasure and efficiency are joined in the need and opportunity to collaborate with other individuals with whom to establish "meaningful connections" (Impact Hub, 2018). But how and why an individual decides to join Impact Hub? And what is required on their side so as to feel

part of its symbolic community? The story of Sergio is the story of how an individual becomes a "hubber".

Show me who you are, and you will get a job!

Sergio was born in a small village in the Tuscan countryside in 1981. He studied photography, and for a while he actually tried to make a living as a photographer. But after a few years of financial difficulties and self-doubt, he lost hope and began to work with his father as a house painter. He was frustrated and unhappy. After a couple of years, he tried his luck and applied for a job as a video maker for KOALA, a social cooperative based in Florence. It wasn't a dream job, but at least it could provide him with a monthly salary, and no house painting involved. The application was successful, and Sergio started working for the social cooperative, the directors of which, in 2014, launched Impact Hub Florence. It was as their employee that Sergio started spending time at Impact Hub.

Eventually, Sergio left his job at KOALA, but decided to remain at Impact Hub in the aim of building a career as a freelance photographer. This decision followed a strategic set of considerations:

I didn't like Impact Hub, I went there just to find useful contacts... As a matter of fact, in Florence all the cultural projects are given to those who are part of Impact Hub, even if they are not more skilled than others. And, you know, if you want to be a freelancer, the first thing you need is to build a portfolio of contacts ... And I'm not good at PR, I'm pretty shy. So I've understood that this place is basically a place where you can meet a lot of people, and then make friends, so if they have a job to do they will offer it to you, to a friend, rather than to someone else ... So I think I'll become a hubber... I'll give it a go! [2013]

Sergio, as virtually all the participants I have talked to during fieldwork, is aware of the modes in which entrepreneurialised work in neoliberal societies functions, and of what it required from the worker. He knows he has to build a network to accumulate the necessary social capital in the form of reputation. In this regard, as it has been noted in the literature, social relationships represent a form of capital that can - through a series of steps - be monetised (at least for the luckier). Yet, Sergio specifies that to actually take advantage of Impact Hub's social relationships you have to establish 'friendships', because if some work opportunity emerges, it will be given to 'a friend'.

This resonates with what Anita, a woman in her mid-twenties, member of Impact Hub Milan, told me during an informal interview:

Being a hubber is like building a career ... you are in an informal environment so they can really see who you are and what skills you have ... Essentially, you make friends, and then you may find a job ... For example, there was a guy who was working on a project and they needed a graphic designer, so he asked

me, because we were friends, and we already knew we shared the same values... 'That's how I got my first job! [2012]

Anita is clear in defining her being part of Impact Hub as a way to build a career. She describes the process precisely: at Impact Hub you are visible - 'they can really see who you are' - and this visibility of the self is what provides the conditions for friendships to arise. Having friends amongst other hubbers is what will then enable to catch professional opportunities. Impact Hub is thus described as a place for self-disclosure, and self-disclosure, in turn, is considered fundamental to establish a mutual bond of affection and trust - a friendship - that can lead to career advancement. Both Anita and Sergio point out that "making friends" comes before finding a job, both logically and chronologically: "you become friends, so if they have a job they will offer it to you: a friend". These two elements are interconnected to the extent that the former is considered a necessary condition for the latter. Revealing "who you really are" in order to make friends is an essential requirement for the development of a career.

In order to access the network sociality of Impact Hub one has not only to come across as skilled, helpful or resourceful, but has also to disclose her or his personality in a way that can be perceived as authentic. What is involved in the network sociality of Impact Hub is not simply the widening one's contacts' portfolio, but rather the disclosure of one's personality. The relationships that emerge are thought of as 'friendships' - however transitory, however instrumental. As we will see, at stake there is a form of ethical labour that involves the development of a degree of intimacy and expect individuals to learn how to embody and perform those values that will allow them to have access to potential "friends" and then, as a result, clients, colleagues, and mentors.

Branding and improving the self

At first, Sergio felt deeply uncomfortable and suspicious in relation to Impact Hub's narrative, a feeling that he had had since the very first times he was going there as a KOALA's employee:

At the beginning I felt like an alien... I felt like a fish out of water among all these people who knew the game... at first it seemed to me that they were telling too much of a tall tale... the whole story is about "let's change the world", the "can do attitude"... I could not buy into it... I felt excluded, marginalised. [2014]

As an outsider, Sergio perceived the ethically charged narrative of Impact Hub, its symbolic stance, as artificial. He could not believe its promises. Not adhering to the promoted value system made him feel "excluded". Although he was physically present at Impact Hub, and technically a member, he could not access its sociality. He would feel "different" and would cope with this in the name

of a strategic line of reasoning: he was there for work; he was not supposed to *feel* "part of it". But that of course was problematic, as to maximise one's career opportunities he must feel part of it.

After a while, things took an unexpected turn: without even realising it, Sergio found himself becoming more similar to other hubbers than he could have ever foreseen:

At some point I noticed a change in myself ... I understood it while I was talking to my brother the other day... I was telling him of my career project as a freelance photographer and he replied something like "oh this is too risky! how can you really believe you can do it" and you know what I told him? I said look, if you really want to do something, then you can do it! And I would have never said anything like that before joining [Impact] Hub! So, I could find this strength, this self-confidence thanks to [Impact] Hub, I mean, it's a question of trust in the end, right? And I think that somehow I learned to trust myself there, because you are surrounded by people who say it all the time, and at the beginning you think "oh well this is bullshit", but then you start thinking "maybe it's not that wrong ..." [2014]

If initially Sergio felt marginalised, and the motivational speeches of Impact Hub seemed to him unrealistic and annoying, at one point he began to question his own assumptions, and to open up to the ethos proposed by Impact Hub. Sergio witnessed a transformation in his own self as a result of being exposed to Impact Hub's sociality. At stake there is a perceptible shift in the ways in which he relates to himself, his skills, his purposes, his projects. He perceived himself as having acquired a trait of those 'surrounding' him, i.e. self-confidence, which is often referred to as the 'can-do-attitude' that allegedly characterises entrepreneurial spirits (Bandinelli, forthcoming; Luise, 2018; Marwick, 2015). Sergio became even more aware of the effects of Impact Hub on his own relationship with himself when, after some time that he was not hanging out there, he realised his self-confidence was already fading:

After a while I was no longer going to [Impact] Hub, I felt that my confidence was dying... and I asked myself: why? The external conditions are always the same! So why am I losing confidence? I thought about it and I realised that there are probably things at [Impact] Hub that make me feel good about myself... You relate to other people working there and you learn something... [2015]

Sergio identifies in Impact Hub some "things" that have the power to remodel the feelings he has towards himself. These things have to do with the relationship with the others to the extent that they can be learned from the others. The learning aspect is quite important, for Impact Hub prides itself with the capacity to enable people to do what otherwise they could not have done, offering services such as free business advices (Business Clinics) and various forms of mentoring and counselling to support entrepreneurial ventures. But the learning process referred to by Sergio does not involve only the acquisition of technical skills and knowledge. In fact, when I asked him what is that he learnt, he replied:

You learn to think of yourself in a certain way... You learn that besides your skills, what is really important is the story that you tell, how you sell yourself; and that being at [Impact] Hub you can collaborate, and so you can compare your story with the others' and you can improve [...] You are given the tools to improve. [2015]

The kernel of the learning process regards the relationship that one has with one's self. This relationship takes the form of a narrative, which is thought of as more important than any specific professional expertise. This narrative, on its turn, is developed through the sociality of coworking, by contrasting and comparing one's narration with that of the others. Importantly, a good narration is one that 'sells' the self. The ethical labour is thus directed towards a process of commodification that is instrumental to one's career advancement. Sergio demonstrates full awareness of the importance of self-branding. At the same time though, he recognises in this process the possibility for self-improvement, and the enjoyment of feeling more confident. Self-improvement and self-branding are made to coincide.

Crafting the self

This point allows me to underline that self-branding practices – albeit they necessarily involve a process of commodification that leads to alter some aspects of the self while concealing others – cannot however be interpreted as the strategic and detached crafting of an artificial persona, to whom to compare a supposedly "authentic" one (see also Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2013). Although the process of translating one's personality into the common places and stylistic features of the brand (e.g. presence on social media, elaboration of an elevator pitch, formulation of a catchy narrative etc.) involves a certain degree of staging, this is always also productive of the self. Self-branding is always also a hermeneutic of the self: a process of invention and production of the self. This emerges clearly from the words of Sergio:

You have to create a character that is as adherent to you as possible, you see the people who try to act in a way that doesn't fit them... and it won't work... So you have to keep your being but also to dress it up in a narrative that will help you to get to the people, is a mix of self-confidence ... Having the peace of mind of being yourself and in this way having the ability to make up your story, and come across as the right person... [2016]

Sergio's words reveal a crucial ambiguity: on the one hand it is necessary to create a character and “make up one's story” so as to “sell” one's self. Yet, on the other hand, this character must be “as adherent to you” as possible, somehow stemming from the “peace of mind of being yourself”. In the same interview Sergio put it clearly:

...in the end the character you create must be yourself ... [2018]

This short sentence encapsulates the complexity of the process of subjectivation involved in (net)working practices by pointing at its two sides: on the one hand there is the partially conscious act of crafting a persona; while on the other hand this persona ends up coinciding with yourself. While the impossibility of distinguishing between the self who is on-stage and the one back-stage has been extensively discussed in sociology - at least since the work of Goffman on the presentation of the self (1956) - this aspect is mostly overlooked or left implicit in recent studies on self-branding in entrepreneurialised work environments. The story of Sergio sheds light on the reflexive aspect of branding the self, which I propose to interpret as a process of subjectivation in which the individuals effects certain operation on themselves with a precise objective in mind.

In our last interview, Sergio with a hint of self-irony and a subtle smile declared:

Now I can say I'm a hubber! I think and do things like a hubber, of course in my own way, but as a hubber... I feel I am being myself, in a sense, but surely had I not become this very specific self of mine I wouldn't have advanced in my career, so in a sense I had to become this 'myself'! [2018]

This apparently circumvoluted statement offers a very accurate description of the entanglement between the ethical process of subjectivation, the social dimension in which it takes place, and the economic logic to which it responds. Sergio claims he had become a 'hubber', acknowledging the injunction to become part of a group. He engaged in an ethical labour so as to acquire a certain status and being recognised by his peers as a virtuous member of a community (Arvidsson, 2014). Becoming part of such community is a process that involves an identarian investment and recognition. Sergio feels he is 'being himself', yet the self he is being is also instrumental to the advancement of his career. The self is both reflexively created and instrumentally mystified: 'had I not become this very specific self of mine I wouldn't have advanced in my career'. The dimensions of subjectivation and subjectification are thus completely intertwined: 'I had to become this myself', he claims.

(Un)comfort food

Following from these considerations, I argue that Impact Hub social protocols and collaborative tools function as platforms where to stage and rehears the new self and see if it "works". Let's take the example of Sexy Salads, weekly lunches where everyone contributes with an ingredient to the preparation of a salad. The tablemates are then encouraged to present themselves through a very short speech, in fact an elevator pitch. This is how Sergio reflects on their function:

Sexy Salads gives you the opportunity to test your character in a friendly environment. The first times I was there and had to present myself I was very embarrassed, but then over time you learn how to do it, you learn by imitation, you see what others do... [2015]

The “test” Sergio refers to can also produce harsh results. For example, in the case of Alfredo, an Italian man in his thirties, graduated in economics, who in 2011 joined Impact Hub Westminster. Here is how he recalled his first Sexy Salad:

I love the idea of Sexy Salads, and I was looking forward to participating in my first one, you know...it's a shared meal, it's a great occasion to meet people! But I brought some Sainsbury chicken, I thought it was ok, I mean... I eat chicken... but the others were almost disgusted, you should have seen their faces! They said it politely, but I could tell they felt almost offended... Well... I apologised and left... I guess I've learnt you cannot bring meat to a sexy salad...I think next week I'll bring some pumpkin seeds or quinoa.... [2012]

This anecdote demonstrates that failure to embody and enact the "right" subjectivity may lead to a failure in socialisation. The invitation to collaborate in a common project, in this case a salad, has as both its necessary condition and intrinsic objective that of developing and enacting a certain ethos, a conduct that signals a precise set of beliefs. In Foucauldian terms, this implies the adherence to a regime of truth, therefore a process through which the individual learns what type of discourses are made to function as true in a given context (Foucault, 1977). Indeed, the acceptance of a regime of truth is related to a process of subjectivation. The individual who holds as true certain statements, performs and develops a certain subjectivity, which in its turn is characterised by subscribing to a set of beliefs and values about what is true and false, right and wrong.

The story of Sergio is indicative of the fact that Impact Hub provides individuals with the social technologies to engage in a process of subjectivation³. To offer a schematic summary we can say that people join Impact Hub to meet other people who can offer them career opportunities through partnerships and/or collaborations; but in order to take advantage of these opportunities it is necessary to establish relationships that involve a process of self disclosure; this is actually a process of production of the self. In short, at Impact Hub one learns a way of working, but this way of working is also and primarily a way of being.

Incubating subjectivities

The findings presented in this article indicate that the network sociality of Impact Hub is not merely informational, as it is network sociality *tout court* (Wittel, 2001) but it rather involves a prominent narrative element, in the sense that individuals have to engage in a hermeneutic of the self to become a certain kind of person. Using a Foucauldian parlance, I argue that individuals at

³ These technologies may change, reflecting the developments of the coworking industry in general, and of Impact Hub in particular.

Impact Hub engage with a compulsory and opportunistic sociality that is ethopoietic, for it confronts them with the opportunity of and the need to developing a certain ethos. This is oriented towards the production of a self that is akin to the expectations of potential collaborators, clients, investors. In other words, a self that is 'fit to work'.

These findings may not be applicable to all coworking spaces, for each has its own specificities and arguably different individuals negotiate with them in different ways. In this respect, every coworking functions as a specific social environment that the individual accesses through a social process of learning, the outcome of which may well vary. The case study analysed here sheds light on coworking's role in offering a series of technologies of the self with which individuals can operate so as to acquire a set of ethical dispositions, and consequently a status (Foucault, 2005). In this respect, coworking spaces emerge as apparatuses that formalise and systematise the production of subjectivity that has been recognised as at the centre of the organisation and meaning of work in neoliberal societies. If work is increasingly a matter of lifestyle (Arvidsson, forthcoming), then coworking spaces produce and reproduce the "right" lifestyle for cultural workers.

Conclusion

This article draws on the life-history of one member of Impact Hub to highlight the production of subjectivity that is involved in coworking spaces' sociality. In so doing, I have used Impact Hub as a context where to study the production of subjects that is at the core of neoliberal processes of valorisation. I have tackled this matter deploying a distinctive focus on the selfhood, offering a narrative account of how the production of subjectivity is lived. This analysis has led to two main conclusions. The first concerns the ambivalent character of the production of subjectivity. On the one hand, the self to be produced is a commodified one, and the production is itself compulsory. On the other hand, the individual may perceive its branded version as the outcome of a substantial process of self improvement. The second regards the interpretation and theorisation of the role of coworking spaces. While existing studies have mostly focused on their function in the production of a network and collaborative sociality, I argue that they can be understood as apparatuses for the production of subjectivities in neoliberal cultural economies. Importantly, my analysis has not accounted for all the possible operations of coworking spaces, nor has it considered all the possible nuances of the production of subjectivity as lived. Its objective has been that of opening up the space for an empirically informed discussion on the production of subjectivity and on the crucial role played by coworking.

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